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## The breakup: the Declaration of Independence, Frederick Douglass, and me

Kristin R. Lindsey  
*Depaul University*, [kristinrlindsey@gmail.com](mailto:kristinrlindsey@gmail.com)

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### Recommended Citation

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*College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences Theses and Dissertations*. 200.  
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**THE BREAKUP:**  
**THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AND ME**

A Thesis  
Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

December 2015

BY

Kristin R. Lindsey

Liberal Studies  
College Of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences  
DePaul University  
Chicago, Illinois

## *I. Introduction*

This research started with a writing prompt. The instruction was to write a breakup letter with a thing. While my writing partner penned a snarky farewell to her tattered sofa, I took off in a different direction. “Dear America,” I began, “We are done. I have labored over this. I’ve lost sleep, seethed, hoped, and had my heart crushed. In the end, I am resigned to the only possible conclusion: this relationship is over. For my own sake, I have to move on. I deserve better.” To write these words, and to mean them, felt terrifying and liberating.

Hardly a spur of the moment decision, my breakup had been on the horizon for a while. Once, it seemed anything was possible with America by one’s side – opportunity, equality, freedom, self-actualization, and democracy. I had never *not* known these self-evident truths. Weren’t these the things that made America great? Yet, day after day, the more I looked, the more I saw evidence to the contrary. Cities, hopes, and futures dimmed. Bodies piled up. America’s values wavering, unrecognizable. I wondered if America had somehow changed – or was it me? Perhaps I had fallen prey to a common relationship error: only seeing what I wanted to see rather than what was there all along.

The draft breakup letter provoked a more systematic analysis. After taking a long hard look at my relationship, I realized that America was not a place I could love anymore and, by all accounts, America didn’t love me. There were many reasons for this conclusion – too many, really. There was my dismay as America fought to create a world in its own illusory democratic image – launching wars for liberty, wasting lives and billions of dollars, and to what end? Meanwhile, our own democracy was fraying, with an excessive emphasis on getting money into elections and keeping voters out. Deep government dysfunction prioritized obstruction and ideology over openness and progress. A widening chasm of

economic opportunity was bringing America back to a near-feudal state, where future opportunity was determined, more than ever, by where and to whom you were born. Despite all the warnings about dangers of inequality, of underinvestment in education and infrastructure, and of an election and legislative process that served interests more than people, it would seem that America's loyalty was with capital.

My heart has shattered as cries of "Black Lives Matter" rang out for the four hundredth time in as many years. While the continuing necessity for recognition of Black humanity is ridiculous enough, the pile of slaughtered Black bodies that provoked the outcry is unbearable. And yet it is relentless. I imagined this thesis just as Trevon Martin's murderer was acquitted and as I edit today, nine praying souls in Charleston have been laid to rest. The more I researched, the more I recognized that these patterns were neither new nor isolated. They were simply the most recent iterations of America's deep-seated issues.

Above all other reasons, though, is America's denial. America insistently claims to be the best – an open and free land, where liberty, democracy and equality are sacred and blessed incessantly by God. Indeed, giving voice to doubt or questioning America's greatness is greeted with derision at levels high enough to imply intolerance. And so, while I still care about America and sincerely hope it might recognize and do something about its problems, to protect my heart, I have to close it off.

If a relationship is worth having at all, then deciding to leave is hardly easy. A central question for me was: *What is the threshold?* How much should one endure before deciding to stay or go? I traced this threshold question back through America's history, as generations contemplated staying or going because of race, money, deferred dreams of liberty and equality, or disappointment with hypocrisy.

This thread goes back, ironically, to the Declaration of Independence, when America cited irreconcilable differences and declared its relationship with Britain over. The Declaration was the final step in a long, hard-fought journey with epic worry, debate, anxiety, self-doubt and finally, growing resolve. In the face of unyielding tyranny that threatened what were held as inherent rights, America needed to breakup, declaring that the United Colonies “are and by right ought to be free and independent.” This inspired further research to understand the Declaration more fully, to learn about this breakup letter and what compelled it. What was the threshold? Why these grievances? Was the decision as wrenching as it seemed, and as mine seems now?

With more research, I understood the Declaration as an enigmatic document with multiple aspects: sentimental, tactical and iconic. While the sentimental language mirrors a breakup, this interpretation was a gateway into the Declaration’s more complex characteristics. What this paper will explore in greater detail is the scholarship detailing the tactical purpose of the Declaration. Its original intent was to declare sovereignty and enlist allies to keep the war effort - and the colonies - alive. Internally, it also served two practical purposes. Its rhetoric and presentation were designed to reinforce the will of colonists to back independence and to endure the war. Other research suggested that the process of crafting the Declaration allowed the colonists to try out independence. They undertook a collective act of writing and agreement, synthesizing grievances and local declarations into a single, unified expression. Through this practice, Pauline Maier noted in *American Scripture*, the colonists “manifested the independence they declared.” (153) In other words, not only did America announce it was breaking up, the process helped it to prepare itself, to build its confidence and its support networks, so that it could successfully become independent.

Before undertaking this thesis, I had no concept of the Declaration as a breakup letter or a practical document. I knew it as something more – a defining document, one that stood for America. Like most people, I focused on those self-evident truths in the second paragraph – equality, life, liberty, happiness and government power derived from the people. Yet scholars remind us that the power and moral authority vested in the Declaration of Independence was an unintended after-effect, evolving only once the Declaration's core purpose, separation from Britain, was secure. This paper will trace how and why the Declaration ascended from its original intent towards sacred, iconic status – defining what America stands for at home and blazing a trail for sovereignty and freedom globally.

Close examination of the scholarship on the iconic Declaration also revealed its unforgiveable paradox. On one hand, it nurtured and sanctified ideals of liberty, equality and self-determination. These were unalienable rights worth fighting for. After surviving its first fifty years, Americans lifted up those ideals and applied them to the country's expanding economic, territorial and intellectual horizons. For the next two centuries, they remained the central tenets for America and provided the moral force to its claim of leadership around the world.

Simultaneously, the Declaration invented a tool of protest. If the powers that be are not protecting your rights, it said, it is your duty to cast those leaders aside. You deserve better and should create a system that secures and preserves your rights and happiness. With this invitation, many Americans earnestly took up the “unfinished work of the Revolution,” declaring the rights of workers, of women, of slaves to be free, equal, happy and self-actualizing. (Foner 2) Beyond America, the Declaration ignited aspirations of freedom and sovereignty around the globe, beginning with Haiti in 1804. Yet those declarations went

unheard and unrecognized by America. Once past its own revolution, America clung hard to its founding ideals – and rejected its own logic when used by others. I find this unbearably present today.

What transforms this inquiry from an historical or existential reflection to an actual urgent issue for me is the topic of race. Every single day I struggle to reconcile freedom, equality, and the right to demand better with the exhausting, hostile lived experience of being Black in America. This paper will delve into race as a primary domain of America in conflict with its iconic ideals, a paradox that has led not just me, but many other blacks throughout American history, to step to the brink of breaking up.

In America's formative years, it was Thomas Jefferson, writing in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, who essentially posed this pressing question: *Will Blacks ever have a place in America?* (149) His answer was no. My thesis will track this question as it was taken up and wrestled with by Frederick Douglass when he asked, in his famous speech of 1852 "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?" and repeatedly over his career. Douglass careened between hope and despair, between beseeching America to live up to its words and deeply doubting that Blacks would ever be free, equal, or accepted by America. In the months prior to the Civil War, Douglass increasingly considered the appeal of Black emigration to Haiti, a nation founded by Blacks whose revolution secured freedom from slavery and independence from colonialism. For Douglass and others who considered leaving or actually left, this was the breakup movement of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

A closer look at Haiti is also instructive. In 1804, the people of Haiti issued a Declaration of Haitian Independence, the first Declaration after America's. Unrecognized by the newly minted United States as a fellow sovereign republic, Haiti represented a specter of

slave revolt, economic disruption, and Black independence. However, for Black Americans, Haiti offered potential asylum where equality, freedom and independence might be theirs. America's response to Haiti was illustrative of its fickle posture towards the global outbreak of independence movements inspired by its example.

Douglass was emblematic of many who weighed the prospects of staying or going. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, during the World Wars, and today, some Blacks opted out while others chose to stay to try and make the relationship work. *Should I stay or should I go?* Contemporary Black writers agonize over the question just as Douglass did. On one hand, they voice a belief that centuries of sweat equity must pay off in eventual ownership, that Blacks deserve to reap the benefits of America. They declare a moral necessity of Black equality and recognition. Not only is it home but without Blacks, it would not even be America. The flip side is also arguable: these are "sunk costs." Cutting losses and walking away might be advised (if not a life saving necessity) in the absence of fundamental change. (LaBouvier 4) The enduring relevance of this question, the risks of staying, the pain of giving up – this is what I weigh as I considered my own breakup.

Parallel to the academic inquiry in this paper, I offer my personal reflections. This research informs a real-time process of analyzing my relationship with America. Throughout, I return to the allegory of the breakup. There are limits to the metaphor, to be sure. Deciding to leave is very different from telling America to go. I am an individual and America is a complex conglomeration of identity, people and ideas. It is not a separation of individuals or a negotiation of sovereignty. Regardless of who leaves first, dissolution is difficult. Still, breaking up is a universally understood rite fueled by indignation, anguish,



lingering ties, and self-preservation. It is powerful metaphor for unbundling a complex, emotional relationship.

I offer here, for the record, my own thoughts about breaking up. I indeed believe we equally deserve a life with liberty and happiness; that we have the right to expect that our system will protect those things. If it does not, it is our duty to create something that does or, failing that, to move on.

My letter to America ends, as all breakup letters do, with goodbye. The real America was never the America I hoped it could be. My patience and allegiance are dissolved. At the end of a false and increasingly abusive relationship, for me it is wiser to walk away than invest any more of my body and spirit. Yet, I cannot do so without sharing this manifesto hoping to inspire others to question. I hope my Dear John letter adds fuel and urgency to the revolution this moment deserves.

## *II. The Declaration of Independence*

When considering a breakup with America, the Declaration of Independence offered a useful point of departure. Would the Declaration reveal the colonists' perspective on breaking up with Britain? Was the separation as agonizing and fraught as my own? Was there a "last straw" or a gradual build of grievances? A review of the scholarship on Declaration of Independence illuminated the answers to these questions, and provided much more. It revealed a document of many meanings – at once sentimental, mundane, revolutionary, and iconic. Its form and function were effective for the dual purposes of breaking up and becoming independent. With its tasks accomplished it was then "forgotten almost entirely." (Maier 154) Then, decades after the fact, the Declaration was heroically resurrected. Its introductory language became, and is still, synonymous with the very essence of America – the very ideals I now find so painful and hollow. The elevation of the Declaration was an "accidental" development with lasting implications. (Wills 333)

### ***"What kind of revolution begins with the recollections of a jilted lover?"<sup>1</sup>***

The Declaration delivered its message in 1,337 words. Scholars have scrutinized nearly every one to unravel its structure, its provenance, its intention and its power. Many begin with a classification question: what, exactly, is this text? (Allen 85) Of course, the nature of a declaration is in its name. As Maier noted, it is intended as "a particularly emphatic pronouncement or proclamation that was often explanatory." (51) Garry Wills, in *Inventing America*, added that the Declaration had a pattern. Its petitioning sequence of

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<sup>1</sup> Wills 313.

rights, grievance and redress followed a norm; it was the manner in which these matters were properly handled. As the final communiqué following a series of petitions to the King, the Declaration announced the inevitable final step in light of “un-redressed grievances.” (59-63) Adding one more layer of insight into 18<sup>th</sup> Century statecraft, Maier points out that the colonists’ telegraphed that this was a pointed message when they dared to accuse the King by name in petitions and, ultimately, in the Declaration. “To attack the King was, in short, a constitutional form. It was the way Englishmen announced revolution,” Maier observed. (38) Taken together, this scholarship suggested that the form of the Declaration was critical, orderly, and decidedly un-revolutionary.

Danielle Allen offers a different take on the nature of the Declaration. Her initial assessment of the text is as a “memo” bearing “principles, facts and judgments,” her updated version of the rights, grievance and redress pattern offered by Wills. (Allen 88) She later likened it to an announcement of the “birth of a new political entity” that resulted from the separation from Britain. She then suggests a third interpretation: the colonists, after pronouncing the divorce, “also declare that they are remarrying, now to one another.” (93-95) This analogy opens up an interesting insight: the declaration of changing relationships and affections between parties.

This leads me to offer one further interpretation of the Declaration: a breakup letter. Read in this way, the Declaration revealed a familiar breakup pattern - albeit with elegant language thanks, in large part, to Thomas Jefferson. Following two years of debate, petitions, rejection, anguish, fear, and violence, it announced, with certainty, the end of the relationship. Boiled down, the colonists’ message to Britain was this:

*We have to part ways, but I owe you an explanation.*

*This is about what I deserve, what anyone deserves – life, liberty, happiness, and safety. Let's be honest, I'm not getting this from you. I know I owe it to myself to move on, to do something else. This wasn't an easy or quick decision. I hoped things would change, but I just got more of the same old George.*

*You're probably thinking, "Seriously? What have I done?" Well, I have a list.*

*All along, I've pleaded, told you what I needed yet nothing changed. We were once so close, but you've shown your true colors. You don't care.*

*I've made a decision. You and I are done, and from here on, I do what I need to do for me. There is no turning back.*

Like other declarations, a breakup follows some conventions. It sets forth justifications for the record. With each recounted grievance, the author makes plain its gravity to the recipient, and builds internal resolve to move on. If capable of magnanimity, the writer might convey to the one they once loved (and may still) that they have agonized. Yet, to be a breakup letter, it inevitably must end with dissolution. The Declaration shares these characteristics.

A breakup is also an emotional pronouncement. There was much evidence that anguish, fear, and emotional turmoil was real for the colonists. The unknown, the perils of war, long standing connections with Britain, and habit kept many wringing their hands. Maier offered John Dickinson as one example; he wrote of the pain that would come from a breakup, "torn from the body, to which we are united by religion, liberty, laws, affections, relations, language, and commerce, we must bleed at every vein." (29) Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence offers rich fodder for an analysis of the

sentiments behind the Declaration. Maier described the dramatic arcs of Jefferson's draft: "In lines full of passion he went on – it almost seems he couldn't stop – overleaping natural pauses, heaping one denunciation on another." Later, she noted that "his anger was beginning to dissolve into melodrama," before finally reaching its concluding renunciation of allegiance (141-142) As one might expect, in Jefferson's first draft of the breakup letter, raw, searing emotion came through.

The Jefferson draft contained language unusual for statecraft, but superb for a breakup: "last stab to agonizing affection," "we might have been...a great people together," "forget our former love," and "unfeeling brethren." (Wills 378) Wills acknowledged how oddly this language may strike the contemporary reader, though he understood these ideas not as "romantic drivel" but as concepts of their time. (313) Just as the Declaration was constructed to follow a convention (rights, grievance, redress), these phrases mirrored the humanist philosophy of Jefferson's enlightened era. They reflect the profound disappointment at the apparent end of a special bond of benevolence and affection between the colonists and the British people. The realization that one people were now torn apart into two was as painful as anything could be.

At the core, Jefferson's words reflect an Enlightenment worldview with three linked premises. One was that "all men possess an equal and automatically functioning moral sense." (Wills 285) While they may differ in aspect and environment, their shared nature was innately moral. Second, in this moral community, men were linked by shared bonds of benevolence and affection, and finally, government's highest purpose is enabling and protecting these ties. (292)

This interpretation was echoed by historian Gordon Wood who observed, “Jefferson [and Paine] concluded that all men were basically alike, that they all partook of the same common nature. It was this commonality that linked people together in natural affection and made it possible to share each other’s feelings.” <sup>2</sup> (216) The colonists and the British people shared this bond and once were unified under the same language, culture, and crown as a people.

As grievances mounted, the kindred spirit between the peoples seemed broken for good. The colonists could not accept the complicity of their “unfeeling brethren” in tyranny that rejected their rights and equal humanity. This is what Dickinson, Jefferson, Paine and others now mourned so deeply. Wills circled back to the Declaration’s first few sentences:

“Jefferson spells out what was implicit in the Declaration’s opening sentence, which spoke of “one people” in America severing the bands with another, an alien people in England. The severance had taken place in the hearts of men – the Declaration is just a recognition of this fact in history. . . . Two peoples at odds cannot be made one, on the basis of mutual benevolence.” (316)

Jefferson’s Congressional editors toned down the anguished language about unfeeling brethren, agonizing affections, and love. The final Declaration spoke of appealing to the “native justice and magnanimity” of the British people, reminding them of “ties of common kindred” though it sadly recognized they were “deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity.” Both draft and final led to the same conclusion: in the face of insurmountable grievances, one people, once powerfully bound, must now end this relationship and the colonists would move on to their a new independent life. They then pledged wholeheartedly to do just that.

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<sup>2</sup> In the chapter on race, we return to this notion of shared nature amongst a people to explore who was included and excluded from this circle of benevolence and affection.

***“Theorized into existence”<sup>3</sup>***

If a declaration is an announcement with explanation, there is a final step to achieve its purpose: delivery. To serve its function, a breakup letter must see the light of day. Once delivered, what was the British response? Upon learning of the Declaration, Britain disdained the colonists’ claims to sovereignty and independence. They “deplored the presumptuousness of the colonists,” and their “impudent, false and atrocious proclamation,” and did not deign to formally respond as that would only encourage the colonists and Britain would not be put in a position to “recognize that equality and independence, to which subjects, persisting in revolt, cannot fail to pretend.” (Armitage 73-75)

From within the colonies, former Massachusetts British Governor Hutchinson dismissed the list of “pretended tyrannical deeds,” while in Britain, attorney John Lind was tasked with crafting an informal rebuttal, essentially an itemized dismissal focused on the illegitimacy of the grievances. (Armitage 74) Of one hundred fifty nine pages of response prepared in Britain, only eight even mentioned the preamble. Clearly, the grievances were the focus. (Wills 65) Lind dismissed the preamble as underserving of attention. Britain essentially replied with a “how dare you” and “whatever,” waving away the claims of its soon to be ex-colony.

Yet, sharing this news with Britain was not entirely the point. The ongoing Revolutionary War already suggested the relationship was in trouble. The resolution for independence adopted by the Congress on July 2, 1776 was also a straightforward breakup pronouncement. The Declaration’s message was intended for other important audiences within and outside of the colonies. Internally, the Declaration boosted the will and

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<sup>3</sup> Fliegelman 1

confidence of Americans to stay the course, pursue independence, and persist in the war that would be required. Externally, the Declaration let the world know America's relationship status had changed, and gave America a chance to tell its side of the story. Free of its ties to Britain, America sought support and alliances from other quarters.

Externally, the Declaration was an announcement to a "candid world" to tell its side of the story and enlist the support of friends. Richard Henry Lee's July 2, 1776 resolution, which had set into motion the committee to prepare the Declaration of Independence, triggered two related actions: form foreign allegiances and develop a plan of confederation. Of these, the Declaration was not the most important task – it was "just the necessary step toward the two projects men were principally wrestling with." (Wills 333) A formal announcement of sovereignty ("free and independent") necessarily preceded the negotiation of a treaty for commerce and military assistance. No one would come to the aid of American revolutionaries without free agent status. If Americans were still entangled with Britain, any allies would risk becoming British targets. To declare themselves "free and independent, Armitage reminds us, was to invoke an emerging idea on the world stage, that of the Law of Nations, which described equal status and inviolability as conditions of sovereignty. With the Declaration, the Americans said they were under their own control, without allegiance or willing involvement with Britain and, as equals on the world stage, they were able to enter into relationship with others. (Armitage 40, 107) Confederation, in turn, was necessary to formalize a single, united entity with which other governments could "legitimately conduct commerce and enter into alliances." (Armitage 36)

To be sure, signaling the world was an urgent matter. America would need help from friends to survive the separation. Supplies and assistance were needed "to keep their army



in the field and their hopes of prevailing alive.” (Wills 325) Without outside help, it was not likely that Americans would be able to persevere or succeed in their war. As urgent as defense was, there was also disruption of commerce. The British had choked off trade, with devastating impact, leaving America with no resources of its own. Looking ahead, America was also excited to spread its wings and claim “equal station” on the world stage by opening “American commerce to a wider world outside the limits previously set to it by the laws of the British empire.” (Armitage 17) As it prepared to step out on its own, America would not want to appear desperate – and Jefferson’s notes reflected Congress’ urge to acting quickly, to “propose an alliance while our affairs wear a hopeful aspect.” (Wills 329)

Sharing the Declaration with the world also offered a platform for America to tell its side of the story favorably for the record. In *Justifying America*, Stephen Lucas observed that, “Congress knew that regardless of how the Revolution turned out, future generations would reach their own judgments about who was right and who was wrong,” and designed the document to “create a favorable image” of its actions and a “justification for the Revolution.” (73-79) This declaration of sovereignty also shifted the framing in a significant way: the war could not be called a civil war within the British Empire; it was now a war of independence. Colonists were not insurgents – they were freedom fighters, which, we will see below, invigorated the recruiting efforts of General Washington.

While the Declaration was written with the outside world in view, the main audience for the Declaration was the colonists themselves. Scholars agree that a primary purpose for the Declaration was to announce to Americans that independence had been declared, to bolster their confidence to become independent, and to strengthen their resolve to endure the struggle ahead. “If independence were to succeed,” Lucas wrote, “it would have to be

accepted by substantial portion of the other 70 or 80 percent of the colonists, who ranged from zealous backers of independence, to reluctant supporters, to middle of the roaders, to apathetic." (81) Tories could be managed, but Americans themselves would have to *believe*.

To accomplish this, John Hancock issued the order that the Declaration be proclaimed aloud to the people and to the troops. Maier noted that the Declaration "provided a vehicle for announcing independence to the American people, and if properly framed, might evoke . . . commitment to the cause of nationhood and above all, inspire the soldiers who would have to win the independence that Congress proclaimed." (131) As requested, General Washington read the declaration to troops so that they might "act with Fidelity and Courage . . . knowing that now the peace and safety of his Country depends (under God) solely on the success of our arms." (Maier 156) With a decision finally declared, Washington could unequivocally issue a call for more soldiers to join in the effort to cement the newly claimed independence.

Readings, public events and celebrations held in cities, squares and town halls were greeted enthusiastically with "general applause and heart-felt satisfaction" (Maier 157). There was even this familiar breakup ritual: pictures, effigies and signs bearing the symbol of the "ex" King George III were burned in great public bonfires across the colonies; in Georgia, there was even a mock funeral for their namesake. (Maier 158) With these rites, Americans raised their spirits, let go of the old, and embraced their new free and independent status.

Garry Wills, Jay Fliegelman, and Stephen Lucas all observed that the Declaration was, in fact, constructed deliberately to provoke this response, to help the colonists to see themselves as one people, and to begin a process of creating a shared culture. Fliegelman

asserted that the public ceremonies made the Declaration more than a document - it was a defining shared moment, an “event” to “galvanize the bond” and “create consensus.” (26)

The persuasive power of the Declaration was precisely calibrated in the words themselves, into how they were ordered and spoken. In analyzing the text of Jefferson’s draft, Fliegelman noted diacritical marks to indicate pauses – to ensure that the Declaration’s full rhetorical power was achieved when read aloud. (5) Jefferson wrote that his intent was “to place before mankind the common sense of the subject in terms so plain and firm as to command their assent and to justify ourselves in the independent stand we are compelled to take.” (Lucas 68) In other words, if laid out the right way, the self-evident would be undeniable. Lucas noted that each word was “chosen and placed to achieve maximum impact” and cumulative persuasive power. (83) Among other rhetorical strengths, Lucas scrutinized the Declaration’s “progression of thought and structural unity,” the “logical demonstration” of its preamble, and the throbbing intensity of the grievances, each sentence an accusation: “he has . . . he has . . . he has . . .” (85-96) Indeed, it may be for this reason Jefferson resented the changes to his carefully worded case until his death and claimed his own draft as one of his chief accomplishments, calibrated as it was to stimulate the common sense. (Wills 319) In any case, the final Declaration provided both language and occasion to confirm once and for all: America was *over* George, they were a free people, and they were pledged to do whatever it took to secure that independence.

This breakup moment was not just about saying goodbye to the old. Of equal importance was instilling habits for a new, independent life. Maier and Allen brought this function of the Declaration to life, noting that the process of creating and approving it enabled the colonists to practice *being* independent. Maier asserted that the practice began

before the Declaration was final. As early as April 1776, localities, counties, colonies and other jurisdictions expressed their thoughts on the question of independence. Through July of that year, the “voice of the people” gathered steam through over ninety documents of various sorts – instructions to congressional delegates, documents to create local governments as instructed by John Adams’ May 1776 resolution, and local “declarations of independence.” (48-49) Maier suggested that these documents nurtured a common narrative that fed into, reinforced, or were reinforced by the Declaration. Many grievances documented by separate colonies became one. Fear of self-rule and questions of “what now?” became confidence through these local expressions of self-definition and proclamation. Maier also noted the transformative power of editing, which enabled the many voices of the drafting committee and the Congress to collaborate, incorporate the voice of the people, and ultimately agree to one Declaration.

In the end, the symbolic and unnecessary signing of the Declaration also served as a manifestation of this independence. Signing demonstrated that this was not “the work of an inconsequential faction of colonists, as their critics in England so often alleged, but the voice of the American people and the men of consequence they selected to speak for them.” (Maier 152) These acts: generating and testing their own thoughts about independence at the local level, synthesizing ideas and language, moving forward decisively and collectively with independence, pledging collective support, and signing a symbolic pledge were all steps towards being independent. As echoed by Allen in *Our Declaration*: “They had long been preparing to claim their autonomy and in their preparations, their autonomy had begun to exist.” (98)

***“...Neither needed or deserved commemoration.”<sup>4</sup>***

Here’s the thing about breakup letters - they essentially have a job to do - to declare the relationship over and, maybe, to say why. Their preparation and delivery enable the writer to purge emotions and hesitancy, replacing them with resolve and anticipation. They steel the writer to take on all of the things that their new independent life requires. Once that work is done, breakup letters do not usually have a future. Nor are they regarded as particularly important. They may mark an important inflection point for the writer, the moment a new, untethered journey began. Still, it would be the attainment of independence, and not the breakup letter, that is preserved in memory.

Therein lies one of the ironies of the Declaration of Independence. Once its message was delivered and independence manifested, it too “quickly sank into an obscurity.” (Wills xxv) Yet today, the Declaration inhabits an esteemed place in the American narrative. As Pauline Maier surmised in her book of the same name, it can be fairly regarded as *American Scripture*, holding the core tenets and faith that define America. (xviii) More striking, the notions of national sovereignty and independence are not at the forefront. Rather, it is the introductory prelude, the self-evident justification of equality, life, liberty, happiness and self-determination that now occupy the most holy place. How did that happen?

No one would be more surprised than those responsible for the Declaration’s creation. As noted previously, the Declaration was not considered “one of the more important duties” on the agenda of the Congress – it was a pre-requisite to pave the way for the real work: foreign aid and confederation. The Declaration’s absence from early histories written of the United States and the fact that it was not particularly influential in subsequent

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<sup>4</sup> Maier 162.

founding documents also seemed to herald imminent insignificance. (Wills 324-325)

Moreover, the anniversary of Independence in 1777 was celebrated on July 4 by accident; the idea surfaced too late to enable festivities on the real date of July 2. (Maier 161) Once the habit of celebrating independence on July 4<sup>th</sup> was established, the accomplishment of independence was highlighted – while the Declaration was hardly, if ever, referenced. Maier concluded, “It was as if that document had done its work in carrying news of Independence to the people, and neither needed nor deserved further commemoration.” (162) America’s attention focused elsewhere as it took the next decade to settle the alliance with France, to ratify the Articles of Confederation, and to debate and cobble consensus around the Bill of Rights and Constitution – and longer still for dust to settle between Jeffersonian Republicans and Federalists who wrestled with the translation of ideas into actual policies and government. There was little time to revel in a document.

What seemed to change the status of the Declaration was the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812 between the U.S. and Britain. It was as if Americans had been holding their breath, wondering if their nascent republic would survive, if it would *ever* put an end to this thing with the British. As the War of 1812 concluded, bringing decades of conflict with England to an end, America had, at last, secured its fate: free, independent, and on equal footing with its “ex.” Only then, Armitage wrote, “did the Declaration itself come to be celebrated with the same cross-party national fervor as the Fourth of July itself. It was precisely this period that the Declaration became a national icon.” (92) What followed was an “intense” focus on history and on the Declaration that “appeared quite suddenly and reached a high point in 1826 with the fiftieth anniversary of Independence.” (Maier 175)

How do you turn a dying text into a sacred icon? Not surprisingly, its importance was essentially declared into being. In 1817, Congress commissioned Trumbull's painting for the rotunda of the Capitol memorializing the presentation of the Declaration to the Second Continental Congress (and falsely tying this event to the date of July 4). (Wills 348) In this same period, commemorative engravings were created, and reprintings of the Declaration were produced for "display in homes and official buildings," including state capitols and colleges. (Armitage 93) Much as the reading of the Declaration had instilled a shared understanding and commitment among the colonists in 1776, reproducing and distributing the Declaration recalled anew America's finest moment, and as Fliegelman said of 1776, "reiterated shared beliefs in an effort to maintain a shared cultural world." (45) As icons go, it was a sensible choice to elevate the Declaration. It was theoretically noncontroversial. Its work of independence was done, its breakup premise no longer open for debate, and it lacked the specifics of the Constitution, that were subject to interpretation by legislators or courts. The Declaration was a document of a higher and vaguer order. (Wills 341, 358)

As it was revived, the Declaration seemed to fill a psychic void in the early American narrative. It highlighted the singular achievement of independence and filled the nation's future with meaning. The Declaration marked an inflection point towards expansion, commercial growth, and possibility. Fifty years after the Declaration, that future seemed bright indeed. America's population had grown fourfold, while prosperity and commercial activity unfettered by Britain's control exploded. Canals and railroads enabled this expansion and trade – and all of these blessings were viewed as the "fruits of independence." To reinforce this link, the opening of canals were often scheduled for the fourth of July, and in a further nod to the iconic Declaration, in 1828, "the last surviving signer of the Declaration

turned the earth for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.” (Maier 178) The message was clear: the decision to go it alone made all of this possible for America.

To be sure, the heroic properties of the Declaration were also tied to its sheer originality. When written, the Declaration introduced an entirely new genre of statecraft, an intervention that audaciously demonstrated that states could decree their own fate. (Armitage 22) Imagine a world where no one realized they *could* break up until they saw someone do it successfully. Once invented, unhappy peoples of all sorts recognized the Declaration as a tool they could emulate to announce their sovereignty. Armitage’s global history noted over 100 declarations spawned over two centuries as peoples claimed independence from empires and colonialism. (20) At the fifty year mark, Thomas Jefferson embraced this legacy. Weeks before his death, he wrote about the Declaration, “May it be to the world, what I believe it will be . . . the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self government.” (Armitage 2) With an author’s pride, and all the benefits of hindsight, he retroactively imbued the Declaration with global meaning hardly imagined in 1776. Even then, Jefferson’s focus remained on national sovereignty achieved by America and achievable by others with the Declaration. After all, that was the document’s core purpose.

***“The major adhesive holding us together.”<sup>5</sup>***

Somewhere along the way, the Declaration’s central meaning shifted dramatically. It went from announcing what America had done to defining what America stood for and who Americans were. From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century until now, the rights of life, liberty and the

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<sup>5</sup> Wood 321.



pursuit of happiness became the focal point.<sup>6</sup> Armitage noted that the second paragraph became “the heart of the Declaration’s meaning in the US,” and suggested one theory about why:

Once independence had become an uncontested fact, Americans had little need to remember the assertion of independent statehood in the Declaration’s opening and closing paragraphs. When peace had been restored with Britain, and the precise incidents that lay behind the grievances . . . had been forgotten, all that remained to be revered was the second paragraph. (93)

Though useful, his explanation begs a question: Why revere anything? What void or need was served by sanctifying these ideals? Others scholars offer some clues on this. Both Foner and Maier note an undercurrent of loss and tenuousness, even with all of the apparent growth, success and prosperity. With each passing year, there was worry that Americans might forget who they were and why this revolution mattered. Foner referred to growing concern that, “with the passing of the revolutionary generation, the physical and spiritual ties with the Revolution would be lost.” (11) Conjuring up the bigger principles of the Declaration might arouse “the deepest feelings” of Americans and save them “from a shallow materialism and strengthen their determination to honor and preserve the accomplishments of the Revolution . . .” (Maier 187) In other words, America needed more than external success – it needed a spiritual purpose. Thus, a breakup letter became scripture.

In his book *The Idea of America*, historian Gordon Wood reflected on how the language and principles of the Revolution filled this psychic void. He observed that, “Americans have vaguely known all along that we are peculiarly dedicated to intellectual

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<sup>6</sup> In an ironic twist, the one case of people within America focusing on the Declaration as a sovereignty-invoking document was the Confederacy. South Carolina’s Declaration of Secession “reclaimed” the state’s sovereignty in 1860, relying on language and rationale mirroring the Declaration, to justify and announce their secession; other southern states followed suit. (Armitage 128-129)

principles, and that adherence to these principles has been the major adhesive holding us together.” While states are typically tied together by a nationality, by a common history and ethnicity, this had to be “invented” for Americans. Once America became “one people” separated from Britain, it needed something to hold on to. Wood asserted that it is “the principles of liberty, equality, and free government that make us think of ourselves as a single people. To be an American is not to be someone, but to believe in something.” (Wood 320-322) While speaking in broad terms about the Revolution, Wood relied on the language of the Declaration. This document gave Americans shared aspirations, a faith, and a contrived identity that persist to this day.

Of course, the other idea bundled with the rights named in the second paragraph of the Declaration is the right to revolt. The Declaration, as Maier noted, “offered an implicit standard against which all governments could be compared and found wanting: unless they secured men’s inalienable rights, the people could alter or abolish them and institute others ‘more likely to effect their safety and happiness’.” (192) The revived emphasis on the true meaning and accomplishment of the revolution, there was renewed attention in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century to duty to remain vigilant and resist tyranny. (Maier 187) Not surprisingly, women, labor movements and abolitionists found that the Declaration spoke directly to their causes of equality, freedom, liberty and self-determination. Just as emerging nations modeled their pronouncements of independence after the original Declaration, protest groups within the U.S. issued their declarations. In 1829, the “*Working Men’s Declaration of Independence*” was issued in New York, followed by several similar pronouncements by labor groups. At Seneca Falls, in 1848, a *Declaration of Sentiments* stated that, “all men and women are created equal.” (Foner 46-78) People within America fell into the pattern of declaring

rights and claiming them as self evident, just as the revolutionaries once did – as if the Declaration of Independence and America itself were proof of the validity of that approach. The Declaration’s appeal as a model of protest within America was profound. One historian put it this way:

For all its ambiguities . . . the Declaration of Independence is the single most concentrated expression of the revolutionary intellectual tradition. Without significant exception, sub-variants of American radicalism have taken [it] as their point of departure and claimed to be the true heirs of ’76. (Foner 32)

The Declaration was used as “point of departure” in another way: as a benchmark by which America itself could be evaluated. Did America abide by its own sacred principles? Among the many that pressed this line of inquiry, abolitionists called out perhaps the most blatant oversight as the Declaration’s principles did not extend to enslaved Black Americans. In 1829, the same year that laborers issued their Declaration in New York, David Walker, a free Black abolitionist railed against American “tyranny” and challenged his fellow citizens to “See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language? Hear your language, proclaimed to the world, July 4th, 1776 . . .” (Walker 85) Whether roused by the common sense and rhetorical power baked into the Declaration, or its rising influence as the animating idea of America, groups took up Declaration’s principles and tools and made them their own.

It was one thing to feel a sense of pride when the right to revolt, to demand better, played out on the world stage. However, problems ensued when that impulse was aimed back on America. After all, who has the right to wield the Declaration’s principles as their own? To be sure, America can wrap itself in the ideals codified by the Declaration’s words – and their meaning and reach expanded over the centuries. Presidents Lincoln, Wilson and Kennedy invoked the Declaration as explanation for America’s special relationship with

liberty, freedom, equality and democracy and its mission to preserve it at home and abroad.

(Wills xx) Other nations asserted the principles of sovereignty with their Declarations, though their claims on these principles were not consistently recognized by America.

America not only originated the genre; it reserved the right to judge the worth and legitimacy of subsequent petitioners of independence. Despite abundant evidence that its actions and words were in conflict at home, America clung to its written principles and defied calls for change. Perhaps, as Armitage suggested, there was a “rule that once states have established their own independence they become resistant to further internal challenges to their autonomy or integrity.” (141)

The Declaration of Independence is a work of unintended genius. It began as a breakup with Britain, and in preparing it, Americans both practiced and manifested their new independent status. Emerging states recognized it as an effective tool for pursuing their own sovereignty. However accidental, the Declaration’s principles of life, liberty, equality and self-rule were adopted as America’s defining, core beliefs. They would be a litmus test – one that America uses to judge others, yet resists as a measure of its own behavior. This painful hypocrisy is explored more in the following chapters.

At the end of this exploration, I return to a thought, summarized best by Garry Wills: “If there is an American *idea*, then one must subscribe to it in order to be an American. One must . . . proclaim it, prove one’s devotion to it.” (xxii) I believe that we all equally deserve life, liberty, happiness, safety and that our systems should provide that, or we need to find new ones. I also believe my faith in them is not matched by America. The ideals for America seem hollow. Maybe that was foreseeable. Those words were just intended to get America through the breakup, and were retrofitted with meaning only after the fact. Perhaps, then,

being American means holding on to an illusion. All I know is that America is not what it says it is – and that tends to be a deal breaker in a relationship.

### *III. My Declaration of Independence*

Dear America,

There is only one possible conclusion here: this relationship is over. To have the slightest chance at a fulfilling life on the same footing as anyone else, as I believe this universe intended, it is necessary for us to part ways. Still, you deserve to know the reasons why. If I'm honest, I also need to share them for the record. I want anyone who cares about you to understand my reasons and perhaps support me in my choice. Or at least, to have the chance to hear my side in my own words.

Here's what I know to be true, now and always: you, me, all of us have the same innate need and right to live free and, hopefully, happy. These are fundamental, coming from a source bigger than you and I. Otherwise, why are we here? No one should be able to change that. Our relationship was predicated on your respect of these rights and a mutual desire to help each other strive to be better. I trusted you to do that. It's the one reason to have a relationship rather than going it alone. However, when the relationship stops working, when my very personhood is denied, disrespected or, worse, harmed by you, I must leave. I owe myself a place to thrive safely and happily, on my own if I have to. Don't get me wrong, this was a very hard choice. I have struggled mightily, thinking perhaps I should keep my concerns to myself, gloss them over, and stick this out. I kept looking for a reason for hope when there was none. For years, I've waited, watched, and done a lot of wishful thinking. In the end, I had to ask: When is it wise to stay in a bad relationship regardless of the unknown on the other side? I had to look at the real you, not the America I hoped to see. You may have been great once, but not now. The America I fell for and the America of today are entirely different. Despite your flaws, I wanted to believe you were open to self-improvement. I

finally realized you are not going to change. You have become the tyrant you once railed against, and that works for you. I can stand by no longer. I would bet you have no idea how I could have these feelings about you. Let me tell you, and anyone who reads this, my reasons:

*You have broken the back of democracy, creating a system ruled by money, not people.*

*You have substituted animosity for governing, histrionics for decision making, and encouraged a chasm that puts at risk the systems, futures, financing, and basic human needs of everyone around you. You seem willing to spend whatever time and energy you have in an ideological pissing match.*

*You endeavor to make voting difficult, creating obstacles, rules, barriers all aimed at controlling the people's voice.*

*You hold tight to a dream that has long faded. The promise you once held for economic mobility is gone - children's futures are not better than their parents. Families are trapped by the economic circumstances of their birth: poverty, racial segregation, education, health, employment, and safety all predicted by zip code. Horatio Alger is dead, though you pretend you saw him just yesterday and you swear, he's just fine.*

*You keep trying to reverse or refuse any acts that would put people without financial resources on equal footing with those who have. Your short-term vision rejects future investments in education and infrastructure.*

*You have stoked hatred against your arrogance around the world and take on all fights with the enemies you have created. You seem ever ready for a brawl, regardless of the fact that your exploits wasted revenues, sent tens of thousands of your own to die needlessly, and robbed many more of productive, sane lives and futures.*

*You have created a police state, armed, dangerous, and unaccountable. Is it any surprise there is no trust in a system that can make you disappear, in a blink, right before our eyes, in front of the cameras. Civil forfeiture and fee schemes have turned justice into a revenue-generating enterprise. Poor people's prisons have made an unwelcome return and private contractors have been set loose, accountable to no one.*

*You have prioritized an armed citizenry without regard to the consequences. You have elevated guns to an unalienable right – in conflict, as that right may be, to life, liberty, safety and happiness, and despite all evidence and reason.*

*You have denied the opinions of others, the facts of science, and the laws of nature by refusing to limit irreversible environmental damage.*

*You increasingly cloak all things in a narrow religiosity –making policies, defending discrimination, and consecrating causes small and large – all in the name of Christianity.*

*You have nurtured a false, unstable, and unsustainable economic system that venerates capital gains and wrings the life out of the people and resources that make them happen. You are completely at the will of capital; they buy your allegiance and compliance while balking at supporting government operations. You fall for it every time, pandering to those who have, and doing whatever it takes to keep them on your side.*

*You resist immigration - the same immigration that made you who you are. You denigrate and criminalize those who come to make their lives better, still lulled in by your charm and possibility, all while immigrants labor in jobs and conditions that are beneath you. You forget who you are and deny where you came from when it suits you.*

*You hold tight to belief in your inherent greatness rather than opening yourself to different ways forward. This is as far from your enlightened beginnings as I've ever seen you. It pains me to watch as you narrow your mind against facts and dissent, and claim to have the answers. Why so much whistling in the dark?*

*You have constrained and denied freedom to all of your people. To my people. To me. You falsely held out the idea of freedom and equality, then stood back and watched as blacks, women, poor, and the marginalized of all stripes tried to pursue what they mistakenly thought was theirs. Sometimes, with neither haste nor commitment, you intervened and expected heroic recognition. Other times, you were actively or passively complicit:*

*For denying my humanity.*

*For building your wealth on someone else's effort, on the back of a whole race of people - my people - and pretending you didn't. Pretending it didn't matter then or now.*

*For criminalizing a race of people, keeping them practically enslaved through peonage and its modern counterparts.*

*For denying participation in your democracy.*

*For creating second-class schools, housing, healthcare, neighborhoods, jobs and pretending we could make up for lost time if we just tried hard enough.*

*For making me beg, fight and die to have what all humanity is owed.*

*For treating my people as an expendable commodity.*

*For creating and enabling a state of terrorism through lynching, whipping, confining, raping, vilifying, drowning, burning, slaughtering, and meting out flawed, inequitable justice.*

*For pretending, as it suited you, that this was: normal, divinely devised, a temporary lapse of judgment, behind us, overblown, or our own fault.*

In 1776, you had a flawed relationship too. And the more you observed and analyzed, the more you realized it wasn't right. You couldn't participate in your own destiny. The things you worked for - your reasons for emigrating in the first place - were slipping away.



Every day, the rules changed and the deck seemed to be stacked. You enumerated your grievances too: Britain was instigating violence, instilling a controlled judiciary, creating intense bureaucracy, and engaging privateers. Your population and growth were stifled and controlled to suit a tyrant's interests. You decided you could do better and had to get out on your own.

It's hard to look at this list today. These things you once believed in enough to fight for, I need to hold them up to you now. They are all making a comeback. What you once fought against, you now institute and defend.

The whole time we've been together, I've pleaded with you, tried to work with you, told you what I needed. You don't care. I have tried to work this out with you. I've put my whole heart and life into ways to make it better. I've appealed to your mind, your conscience, your bottom line, your moral authority, your systems, your legacy and future. Nothing changed and my faith in you is depleted. I don't think a relationship with you is worth fighting for anymore. It was never great, I just wanted it to be. I deserve better.

We are done and there is no turning back. I will live out my days without further allegiance to you. It's not like I have something else lined up. I will still be around for a while but I have no commitment to you. Practically speaking, this leaves me stateless, seeking and finding refuge where I can. I'd rather do that than stay with you. I won't fight you or actively work against you as long as you bring me no further harm. I just don't care anymore. I wish you luck. I hope you turn things around for yourself. For my own sake, and that of my family and community, I stand behind this decision with all that I have and all that I believe.

Goodbye.

Kristin Lindsey

#### *IV. Frederick Douglass, Haiti, and Me*

If anything brings the inconsistencies of the Declaration into sharp relief, revealing the chasm between words, intent and action, it is the pervasive racism of America. The fact that enslaved and free blacks were not treated equally, and were denied life, liberty, self-government, safety, and happiness was self-evident in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, persistent in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and remains doggedly present today. Again and again, African Americans have asked when the spirit of '76 might be upon them: David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr. and countless others called upon America to live up to its creed. For them, the Declaration was both hammer and mirror; it created the right to revolt, to demand independence, and held up tangible evidence of America's empty promises.

Yet, as seen in the previous chapter, the meaning ascribed to the words of the Declaration was accidental. The Declaration did not purport to address freedom, equality, and sovereignty among its people when written. The Declaration's words were only mined for meaning after the fact by a young nation looking for a purpose to hold it together. America would interpret the Declaration's ideas inventively and selectively, not held to some innate, pure, sacred intent. There was none.

This scenario brings to mind a classic relationship dilemma: the perilous gap between truth and hope. Truth means taking your partner exactly as they are, as revealed by their actions, despite what they may say. You accept the "real" them lurking in unguarded moments and bad habits. *Or* you can hope for change and assume anything you don't like, you can fix. You might believe that with enough work, love, hope, and encouragement, your

partner will become the one you want (and the one they want to be, whether they know it or not). You take hope in the slightest change, perhaps valuing sweet words over brute action. The decision over whether to stay or go in a relationship often whipsaws back and forth in this space, trapped between harsh realism and wishful thinking.

This chapter will explore race as a domain of enduring, profound conflict between the real America and the aspirational one. It reveals a rift between the limited intent of the Declaration and the wishful thinking millions of aspirants poured into it. Over hundreds of years, this tension led many blacks to the brink of breaking up. Frederick Douglass careened between hope and despair, between wishing that America might extend the Declaration's premise to all, and deep doubt that blacks would ever be free, equal, or accepted by America. At one point, his doubt led him to consider traveling to Haiti, a potential refuge where black equality, freedom and independence were explicitly and simultaneously declared. Haiti's existence offered an intriguing alternative as black Americans debated staying or going. It also provoked a twisted and hypocritical posture from America towards the first nation to replicate its bold act of claiming independence. Douglass was emblematic of many from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. We will trace the same "stay or go" debate – the struggle to choose between hope and brutal reality – at key moments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and through today, as it rages on.

Before turning to Frederick Douglass, it is useful to revisit someone else who offered a take on the "real" America, who considered black futures within it the new nation, and weighed in heavily on the side of parting ways: Thomas Jefferson.

***“Convulsions which will probably never end . . . .”<sup>7</sup>***

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson infamously shared his views on the races and described a two-step plan for emancipation of slavery with deportation. In his view, manumitting some (or all) slaves to remain in Virginia was not an option in light of prejudice and animosity freed blacks would encounter, a lack of legal and practical protection, plus the reality that blacks lacked the means to provide for or protect themselves. (Wills 296-7) Rather, Jefferson proposed blacks must be gradually freed, educated, and deported to a place to be determined. Upon emigration, this “free and independent people” would be provided with tools for a productive life, protection, and the pursuit of happiness including seeds, household objects, livestock, and arms. In the meanwhile, a white immigrant work force would need to be provided for and subsidized to fill the massive gap in labor during the transition. (148-149)

Jefferson expounded upon the case for deportation, as follows:

Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the State, and thus save the expense of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the blacks of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which Nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race. (149)

In his analysis, Wills predicted the winner – given that whites “had all the wealth, weapons and outside support,” emancipation without emigration would be a recipe for “genocide.” (296)

Jefferson’s rationale is worth examining. First, Jefferson identified prejudice perpetrated by whites – not racial inferiority, not black violence – as the core reason for

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<sup>7</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. 149

emancipation with deportation. Jefferson acknowledged that “deep rooted” prejudices defined whites’ actions presently and likely into the future. Importantly, his recognition of racism located not only the fact of prejudice with whites; through this proposal, he also placed on America the responsibility of fixing the dilemma it created.

Putting aside for the moment deep prejudice and animosity, assimilation and co-existence in one country was still inconceivable for fundamentally different peoples. America had not resolved “the problem of different cultures and how they might live together.” (Wills 293) To be sure, Black equality *within America* was beyond imagining for Jefferson and his contemporaries. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Benjamin Schwarz explains that prejudice was shared “by nearly all white Americans,” embraced by slaveholding southerners and acknowledged by northern colonizationists in Maryland and Connecticut. (14-17) James Madison represents one such pessimistic view; he was convinced that “objections to a thorough incorporation of the two people are, with most of the whites, insuperable.” (Schwarz 17) Thus, Jefferson advocated for blacks’ removal to a place to be “free and independent” – where self-actualization was possible.

Incredibly, Jefferson’s philosophy accommodated the simultaneous belief in racial inferiority (which he held and enumerated elsewhere in the *Notes*) and a view of blacks as equally and morally human. The same enlightenment principles about moral sense that infused Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration led him to a belief that was, in the words of historian Gordon Wood, downright “radical” for his time: “at the bottom, every single individual, men and women, black and white,” had “equal moral worth and equal moral authority.” (226-228) Schwarz agreed, noting that this view set Jefferson apart from most of his peers; unlike them, he “scorned justifying slavery with his ‘scientific’ racism.” (21)

Schwarz went on to quote Jefferson as saying, “Whatever be [blacks'] degree of talent, it is no measure of their rights.” (21) Whatever characteristics Jefferson categorized as making blacks different – and even inferior – his philosophy accommodated equal moral authority and unalienable rights.

Add to this premise one more raised earlier in this paper: what bound people together were benevolence, mutual affection and reciprocity. For Jefferson and others, this premise was the core of the Declaration, the basis for society, the reason for government (to protect the benevolent community), and the deal breaker behind the dissolution of America and Britain. Put together, this meant that blacks were equal and they were *a* people, just not the same “*one* people” as other Americans.<sup>8</sup> Jefferson’s assessment was that, in the absence of commonality built upon mutual affection and, worse yet, poisoned by prejudice and injuries, a collective future for blacks and whites in America was grim.<sup>9</sup> It would be unreasonable, by this logic, to think that blacks could “overlook the kinds of wrongs inflicted by slavery, to enter into true brotherhood with the oppressor.” (Wills 304) Yet that “brotherhood” was at the core of Jefferson’s beliefs about society and government. Jefferson put it this way in his autobiography:

Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people [blacks] are to be free. Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction between them. (qtd. in Wills 306)

Thus, Jefferson essentially proposed a declaration of independence for America’s black and enslaved people. As observed by Wills, “just as America could no longer maintain

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<sup>8</sup> Jefferson extended this same logic to Native Americans; they were different from America’s whites; yet possessed of the same moral sense and capacity (see Wills, 286-287)

<sup>9</sup> As explored by Wills in *Inventing America*, Jefferson also applied this rationale to other immigrant groups. Jefferson opposed increases in immigration that could tip the ethnic balance of the new nation, weakening the common ties and bonds required for a benevolent republic. (298)

bonds with British after being wronged so deeply,” so too could blacks not be expected to live with “the agonizing wrongs” they had endured and would endure further in the realm of their former tyrannical oppressor. (303) The time had come for a people – black people – to dissolve the bonds with another, and assume among the other powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which nature and nature’s god entitled them. A free and independent destiny should be theirs.

Jefferson’s proposal is intriguing to consider today, built upon a view of America and race that was simultaneously brutally honest and enlightened, both racist and redemptive. At the time, it went nowhere. Jefferson’s views of human moral equality and a free and independent future for blacks were his own – not America’s. Of course, blacks had their own views as to their affinity with America. Staying or going was to be a far more conflicted and messier question in practice than theory – as Frederick Douglass and the story of Haiti reveal.

***“We want a country which shall not brand the Declaration of Independence a lie.”<sup>10</sup>***

Frederick Douglass’ faith that the Declaration committed the nation to equality, life, freedom, and self-determination for all under the collective roof of America offers an interesting contrast to Jefferson. Douglass not only subscribed to the aspirational meaning of the Declaration, he enlarged it. For Douglass, putting the Declaration’s ideals on the line and waging war for black freedom and equality would fulfill America’s manifest destiny. His wishful thinking was sorely tested as he experienced and witnessed the dismal upswing of racism and slavery during the 1850’s and 1860’s. Periods of wrenching doubt and despair led Douglass to seriously consider seeking refuge elsewhere. In the end, he decided black

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<sup>10</sup> Douglass, Frederick. “The Mission of War,” Speech. 1863, Philadelphia. Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.

existence in America was the birthright he wanted to claim and make better for himself and his brethren.

The Declaration of Independence was a touchstone for Douglass, and he “took every opportunity to invoke the principles...and to claim a historical place for his people in America.” (Blight 73) For Douglass, and many others, the text contained the mandate for freedom and equality that all people deserved, whether black, white, enslaved, free, man or woman. Douglass avowed, again and again, that the doctrine was already written and America simply needed to put it into action. “It is scarcely necessary to search for new truths,” he said in an 1854 speech, “til the old truths, which have been uttered from the Declaration of Independence until now, shall have become recognized and reduced to practice.” (Foner 15)

During his famous 1852 *Fourth of July Address*, Frederick Douglass laid bare what he saw as those unfulfilled “old truths.” On July 5<sup>th</sup>, he ascended to the podium, following a ritual reading of the Declaration of Independence, and skillfully deconstructed the principles and values Americans fought for and enshrined in that text. (Colaiaico 23) In the first part of this speech, Douglass recounted the history of the Revolution’s moral, brave men, who in the face of “righteous grievances” and the “unjust, unreasonable and oppressive” conditions of their colonial bondage undertook the bold act of revolt. Citing the Declaration of Independence and the resolution for independence that preceded it on July 2, 1776, Douglass reminded his listeners of the “denunciations of tyrants,” “shouts of liberty and equality,” and their “sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom.” (6-11, 20) Douglass’ speech recalled the language of the colonists’ pledge: “Your fathers staked their lives, their



fortunes, and their sacred honor, on the cause of their country. In their admiration of liberty, they lost sight of all other interests.” (10)

It was easy work for Douglass to then enumerate the parallel oppressions and the conditions of blacks in America and call out the “national inconsistency” of America’s response to their plight. (34) Unlike those of the colonists’, he noted that black grievances were not considered righteous, their liberty was irrelevant, and their right to revolt was denied. At the same time America could rise up against tyranny in Austria and Russia and warmly embrace fugitives from despotic lands arriving upon its shores, America absolved its domestic tyrants and hunted, arrested, and killed fugitives from slavery. (33) The righteous nation that declared war over a “three penny tea tax,” he remembered, had no difficulty wringing “every last hard earned farthing from free labor.” (33-34) Douglass wondered how a nation that declared before the world that, “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . .” could justify continued human bondage. (34) Douglass concluded that, as of yet, the Declaration and the independence it promised had somehow bypassed him and his black countrymen:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity, . . . your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery . . . mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy. (20)

The entirety of this speech was intended to inspire America to reclaim its moral authority – codified in the Declaration and celebrated on the Fourth of July. To do so, Douglass urged America to take up the unfinished work of ending slavery. A failure to do so, Douglass prophesied in his speech, would not only doom “three million of your countrymen”

to enslavement, it would imperil America itself, endangering the nation's progress, promise, productivity and reputation. (34)

By offering these parallel narratives, and intertwining the fates of America and its black countrymen, Douglass embraced the possibility of belonging, of brotherhood, and benevolence that Jefferson rejected. Douglass claimed as his birthright the nation declared into existence in 1776. Douglass held that all Americans would fulfill the mandate of the Declaration and thrive, or both America and its mission would fail. David Blight further explored Douglass' reasons for linking the future of the nation with the fate of its slaves: "If the union's survival and black freedom could become one cause . . . then perhaps a truly new nation would emerge" and blacks would finally be accepted "into the national family." (Blight 116, 122) Douglass, again, took the Declaration to places Jefferson would never have gone. Not only are blacks and whites one people, their cause is one – and one worth fighting for so that the words of the Declaration "would not be a lie." Douglass poured all of his political and rhetorical energy into awakening the country to this mission and the necessity of war. Blight noted that spiritual and redemptive principles profoundly shaped Douglass' thinking: "Like the children of Israel, Americans had to be tested. Answers to the deepest questions about national meaning and self definition awaited in the Civil War, a conflict in which the sacred trust of the founders would be challenged and reborn." (105)

Much as the Declaration was adapted to fill a psychic void for America –providing a shared faith to explain the nation – fulfilling this invented American mission seemed to fill a psychic void for Douglass, and perhaps the nation. On the one hand, his redemptive framework provided a rationale for committing to a national fight for bigger principles. Fulfilling America's "yet underdeveloped national destiny" Douglass said, in his 1852 *Fourth*

*of July Address*, was foretold in the Declaration. That destiny required safeguarding the Declaration's "principles ... in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost." (9) America could not subvert its own principles, uphold slavery and still achieve its impending greatness.

Of equal importance, the redemptive mission offered an explanation for the pain, suffering, and agonizing wrongs blacks endured. These were the high but necessary costs of bringing about America as it should be, for all. Douglass was relentless in his message of hope and endurance to his black countrymen. Like many of his contemporaries, Douglass invoked blacks' exceptional capability to persist, their "tenacity" and "hopefulness forged by necessity under bondage." (Blight 4) These exceptional gifts were all part of the mythology that gave this misery purpose, for absent a greater meaning, all of this struggle would be for naught. Again, Blight's interpretation illuminated Douglass' reasoning, "If America did not have a special purpose that it must be called back to – or forced to fulfill through a cruel war – then what was to be made of its enslaved race? . . . Without the mythology of mission, it is difficult to imagine how he could have sustained his hopes for black freedom in America." (120)

While Douglass was capable of generating enormous hope, there was constant conflict between his deep investment in the aspirational America and the prejudice and rebuke that characterized the real America, particularly as it unfolded during the 1850s. For Douglass and other black leaders, the decade preceding the Civil War foretold "a future for their people as dismal as the past had ever been." (Blight 1) The actions of America, its leaders, and its people offered substantial evidence that Douglass' faith was misplaced. The Fugitive Slave Law, Kansas – Nebraska Act, the Dred Scott Decision, and other national and local acts to

strengthen the hold of slavery or otherwise curtail the rights, citizenship, humanity, livelihood, and suffrage of blacks proliferated during this period. Indeed, even in the north, as fear of secession and its potential for economic upheaval spread, abolitionists were greeted with increased hostility and Douglass himself was violently attacked as a mob broke up an abolitionist gathering in Boston. (Blight 64)

To Douglass, there appeared to be insufficient will and outrage on the part of America and its leaders to take up a fight that could provide for the freedom and equality of blacks. In the months between Lincoln's presidential election, his inauguration and the attack at Fort Sumter, Frederick Douglass was increasingly frustrated and vocal in opposition to Lincoln's seeming willingness to compromise on deals that would sacrifice black freedom for the sake of the union, and for Lincoln's support of colonization schemes. (Chaffin 176)

Further, it was not at all clear that the people of America shared Douglass' ideals on mutual benevolence or even black *personhood*. Douglass wrestled with the pain of prejudice, white racism, and hatred that he and others, free and enslaved, felt deeply, daily, and with growing force. Douglass acknowledged, "American humanity hates us, scorns us, disowns us and denies in a thousand ways, our very personality." ("Anti-Slavery Society Speech" 1854, xxi) This statement, and countless others along the same lines, evokes Jefferson's prediction. "Born as a slave in this boasted land of liberty," Douglass wrote of the lifetime of hatred that followed: "tinged with a hated color, despised by the rulers of the state, accustomed from childhood to hear the colored race disparaged and denounced, their mental and moral qualities held in contempt . . ." ("A Trip to Hayti" n. pag.) A contemporary of Douglass, Samuel Ringgold Ward, was more blunt, calling prejudice "the ever-present, ever-crushing

Negro-hate.” (Blight 15) The effect of this pervasive racism had to be exhausting, demoralizing and maybe even maddening.

Douglass’ doubts reached their peak in early 1861, leading him right up to the edge of deciding that leaving America was a viable option for his countrymen, and maybe for himself. This represented a significant shift in Douglass’ views on the topic of black emigration. While thousands of black Americans endorsed, pursued and participated in emigration schemes for decades, Douglass had remained opposed to the idea. He believed that to support emigration would be to surrender, to give up on his ideals of black citizenship, black and white co-existence, and fulfillment of the American mission. It meant admitting that racism might always trump America’s destined, declared greatness.

Yet, during this period, as Douglass despaired more and more that blacks may not have viable futures in America and increasingly admitted that emigration to Haiti might be a reasonable alternative. (Blight 132) While he remained philosophically opposed to forced colonization, or Africa-based schemes, Douglass warmed to the idea of Haitian emigration as an option for those who freely chose it. “Without conceding that Africa is our only home, and that we have no right to remain in America,” Douglass wrote with increasing enthusiasm about Haiti, which was geographically closer and symbolically captivating. (“Emigration to Hayti” n. pag.) Indeed, as a nation declared into existence on the premise of freedom from slavery, independence from tyranny, and black equality, Haiti held significant appeal as a “black land of the free.” (Fanning 12)

In March, 1861, Douglass made plans to take a ten-week voyage to “Hayti” to explore for himself and investigate for his fellow countrymen. Writing in *Douglass’ Monthly*, he explained the trip and the rationale behind his positive stance toward black emigration:

... the minds of the free colored people in all the states have been deeply exercised in relation to what may be their future in the United States. To many it has seemed that the portents of the moral sky were all against us. At the South they have been taught to believe that they must soon be forced to choose between slavery or expulsion. At the north, there are, alas! too many proofs that the margin of life and liberty is becoming more narrow every year ... proscription, persecution and hardships are to wax more and more rigorous and more grievous with every year; and for this reason, they are looking out into the world for a place of retreat, an asylum, from the storm which is about to beat pitilessly upon them. (2)

From this reflection, one can surmise Douglass' frustration at the past and concern for the future. While he speaks of investigating this on blacks' behalf, some scholars suggested that Douglass would also "ponder his own emigration." (Chaffin 176) The trip was scheduled to depart April 25, 1861. Thirteen days before that boat sailed, shots were fired at Fort Sumter. The war was on - and the trip was off.

Douglass prepared a footnote that accompanied his May *Douglass Monthly* describing the "tremendous revolution" afoot that would effect the future of blacks and explaining his choice to remain and serve the "cause of freedom and humanity." Blight conjectured that, "there is every reason to believe that had the war not started when it did" that Douglass' support for Haiti would have grown and that his "assimilationist view may not have survived ten more years." (133-134). Of course, that is not how the story unfolded and so, for Douglass, a personal commitment to give America the benefit of the doubt overcame a parallel assessment that maybe America, at its core, was not about ideals or the Declaration at all when it came to black people.

To be sure, the Civil War was ultimately a catalyst for the country to advance many important reforms. Emancipation and the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments were giant steps forward. While those gains were significant, their undoing began immediately. The legacies

of slavery, the unsettled question of black “belonging” in America, and pervasive white racism persisted.

Given that he vested so much of himself and his hope in America’s reform, what was Frederick Douglass’ stance toward the country after the war ended? Douglass watched with particular dismay as America sought to celebrate the reunion and promote reconciliation with the South, justifying the experience through the narrative of the “Lost Cause.” Douglass recommitted to keeping alive the memory of the “abolitionist conception of the civil war and black emancipation as the source of national regeneration.” (Blight 235) In truth, defending the memory of the war was a less complex task than the monumental tactical challenges the war left in its wake for blacks and America. Douglass was no less confounded than others by the task of incorporating millions of blacks into America as free and equal people. The Freedman’s Bureau, which he encouraged and supported, quickly proved inadequate without sufficient resources or power. Douglass too “lacked viable solutions” on questions of land and education, and wrestled with his own conflicted beliefs about self-reliance and the need for federal aid. (Blight 202-203)

To be sure, as the period of Reconstruction yielded to persistent white racism and the rise of Jim Crow, Douglass spoke out repeatedly, calling emancipation a “false freedom” and denouncing both government policies and practice including violence, lynching, and prejudice that threatened black life and liberty. (West 37) Yet, Douglass still seemed caught in the tension between claiming his birthright, finally an “insider” in America - and retaining the clear-eyed realism of an outside protester. Historians note Douglass’ stalwart connection to the flawed Republican party and his “flowering nationalism” at the end of the war that went so far as to encourage annexation of Santo Domingo. (Blight 210) Cornel West, in his

analysis suggested that, when Douglass became one of the “incorporated elite within the Republican party” he lost some of his aggressive revolutionary spirit, his “prophetic fire.” (15) West later asks, “Where is the voice of that early Douglass in the nation as Jim Crow is developing in the 1870s and ‘80s?” (36) It is hard to say if or whether Douglass fought long and hard enough. West seems to imply that he did not. Douglass’ gave over fifty years to making a case for black American freedom, equality and belonging. He claimed victory as Civil War and emancipation were declared; indeed, without upholding an optimistic view, it was hard to swallow all of the pain and loss of slavery and war. Hope sustained him though he saw the dark cloud that loomed. One year after his death, Plessy vs. Ferguson proclaimed that blacks were still not a part of America.

***“We have dared to be free.”<sup>11</sup>***

It is easy to understand how and why Haiti loomed so large for Douglass and others as an historic black nation founded defiantly against slavery and in support of black independence and equality. Haiti is instructive for another reason to this analysis. Its founding as a nation further illustrates the gap between America’s stated, aspirational ideals and its real action in the world beyond its borders. Haiti offers a painful cautionary tale about American racial antipathy, its indifference to equality and liberty, and about America’s hypocrisy in failing to recognize or support its own principles in others.

We begin, once more, with a Declaration of Independence. Haiti’s was the first to replicate America’s act of claiming independence, issuing a declaration in 1804. While Haiti’s first draft was “modeled” on the American version seeking, perhaps, to signal mutuality of cause and engender support from the candid world – that draft was revised to reflect the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Haitian Declaration of Independence*. 1804. In Armitage, 195.



passion, inspiration and boldness of the Haitian movement. (Armitage 115) Indeed, their breakup with France had been a knock down, drag out fight to end bondage and to start a new, independent life. Victorious in their revolution, the new Haitian republic was triumphant and unequivocal in declaring black equality, freedom from slavery, and independence from their colonizers and enslavers. They were strident in declaring to whom Haiti belonged and bold in their claim of liberty. In Haiti, “people of African descent lived without slavery and ruled their own independent nation committed to the abolitionist cause.” (Fanning 27) Armitage also noted, “freedom and independence were more than mere metaphors or abstract norms ... they were animating ideals and hard won prizes.” (116) Unsurprisingly, this emergent island nation terrified American whites reliant on the slave economy 800 miles to the north.

“Independence or Death” proclaimed the Haitian Declaration, vowing to never forget, and to never go back to slavery. (Armitage 193) Unlike America’s, the Haitian Declaration bore no wistfulness or sentiments about their bond with the French. Rather, it asked, “what have we in common with that bloody-minded people . . . their cruelties, their colour . . . they are not our brethren . . . eternal hatred to France.” (Armitage 194-196) As with America, the Haitian Declaration was intended for a “domestic audience.” (Armitage 116) In that way, its strident rhetoric likely served a similar goal – to stimulate the “common sense,” to inspire courage, perseverance, and the confidence to go forward on their own and never look back. In breakup terms, it was pretty clear: *There was nothing good about you and me, not now, not ever. You are dead to me.*

As with America in 1776, Haiti’s public declaration was also in service of recognition on the world stage – it sought support to help it secure its sovereignty and develop alliances

for trade. Haiti's situation was dire, as described by Fanning: "France and its former colony only declared a truce, which meant that Haiti's sovereignty as a nation remained unrecognized. It also left Haiti vulnerable to future attacks." (27) The constant threat of French attacks incapacitated nation-building as Haiti's significant resources, energy, land and manpower were overwhelmingly dedicated to national security. This situation loomed for the first two decades of Haiti's existence.

One might think America a natural ally, as one observer reported in 1825, "Because of America's own history of independence, this acknowledgement was a measure which Haitians and the whole world has a right to expect." (Fanning 122) Except, acknowledgement and support did not come. Haiti discovered how fickle the US could be about the declaration it spawned, but did not appear to mean. The American reaction to Haiti was directly bound up with racism and slavery, principles more important to America than independence or equality. The existence of Haiti "directly challenged white supremacy" and "threatened the stability of remaining slave powers like the United States." (Fanning 10; Armitage 116)

Haiti's entreaties to America for recognition fell upon deaf ears. By all accounts, America recoiled from legitimizing a nation freed from slavery, led by blacks, so close to home. America's slavery interests prevailed, and in Haiti's founding years this led President Thomas Jefferson to reject recognition of Haiti and to deny Haiti the lifeline of American trade. Despite commercial interest from northern states in beneficial trade terms and trading opportunities offered by Haiti, Jefferson "prevented American merchants from legally participating in the Haitian trade . . . pushing a trade embargo targeting the island." (Fanning 31) Further, America's posture toward Haiti differed from the positive reception offered to other Central and Latin American nations during the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when both Argentina

and Colombia were recognized while Haiti's pending request received "humiliating silence." (Fanning 51) America's commitment to turning its back on Haiti persisted until President Lincoln finally granted recognition during the Civil War in 1862. America demonstrated to Haiti that it wasn't the country its Declaration advertised - the real America wanted to preserve harmony in the union, its economy, slave owners, and slavery more than its principles.

And what of Haiti? The nascent republic was forced to suffer and to pay. Continuously threatened, isolated, and recognized by neither America nor Britain, Haitian leaders were forced to buy their sovereignty, accepting terms from France to keep the nation free of invasion. They had to pay reparations to France for their freedom and for France's colonial property in the amount of one hundred fifty million francs in five installments (\$21B total in today's dollars), a debt that crippled Haiti financially for the century, if not beyond. (Fanning 106) Though Haiti survived and encouraged black American emigration over the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it would never create the black "land of the free" or "city on a hill" that it aspired to, and that Douglass and other black Americans had hoped to witness. ("Trip to Hayti" n. pag.)

***"A powerful way to sidestep America's reluctance to become post-racial would be for more Black Americans to become post national."*<sup>12</sup>**

Frederick Douglass and Haiti both took to heart the message of the Declaration and found that reality bore little resemblance to the promised liberty and equality. For the next hundred years, this cycle would repeat again and again, often prompting the same debate: Stay? Fight for America to change? Give up? Hope? Demand birthright? Walk away?

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, Thomas Chatterton. "The Next Great Migration," *New York Times*, February 27, 2015

Moving forward in the timeline since Douglass, America – as reflected in the actions of government, public figures, and the American people – certainly continued to give blacks few reasons to believe in the Declaration’s statements of equality, liberty, life, safety, and autonomy. Reconstruction was disassembled, replaced by Black Codes to ensure that the plantation system and economy could persist. Quantified with devastating specificity in Douglass Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name*, emancipation was quickly undermined by peonage, a forced labor and imprisonment system that facilitated the capture of tens of thousands of blacks. Their crime: being black and poor, being black and in motion, vagrancy, leaving a white employer without a new white employer, being black without papers, and nearly any other convenient excuse designed to capture black convict labor. This system of racial profiling enriched local governments, sheriffs, attorneys, judges and benefitted plantation, mining, rail and industry owners who procured, used, discarded and replenished labor at negligible costs for decades up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Jim Crow legislation and the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court neutralized the constitutional amendments designed to extend humanity, citizenship, suffrage and equal protection. Movements by and for blacks’ to include them as part of America - reconstruction, suffrage, black enterprise development, WWI service, northern migration - was met by a counterforce of violence and intimidation. The rise of the Klan, race riots in dozens of cities across America, and the lynching of thousands in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries “terrorized and traumatized millions of African Americans,” reinforcing the idea that America did not belong to blacks, that life and liberty were not their birthright, and that safety and happiness would not be theirs (McWhirter 15; Economic Justice Initiative 3)

These developments insinuated a continued absence of benevolence, reciprocity and shared moral sense that bound black and white together as one people.

Fully one hundred years after Frederick Douglass deliberated the meaning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, and after the Civil War failed to put to rest the question of America's intent to live up to its Declaration, the Civil Rights movement took up this work again. These battles were bitter and brutal, costing the country and the movement countless lives and spirits. The movement's succeeded in codifying anew the constitutional amendments and freedoms that failed to survive Reconstruction. While the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were profound results, they were insufficient to completely and permanently manifest into existence an America that held, self-evidently, that blacks were equal people deserving of life, liberty, happiness and whose happiness and safety were secured by a government of their making.

The familiar tension between hope and despairing realism unfolded alongside this century of racism. Just as in Douglass' time, many blacks were on the side of hope that America would change and actively advocated, demanded, and agitated for what the Declaration promised. Frederick Douglass would certainly recognize his counterpart in Martin Luther King, Jr., whose moral demands and hopeful vision fueled the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century. Like Douglass, King challenged America to put action behind the Declaration's words. In his "I Have A Dream" speech, King called the Declaration a "promissory note", that said "all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." (1) As Douglass had done a century before, King described the intertwined fate of one American people, white's "destiny tied up with our destiny...their freedom is inextricably bound to our

freedom.” (“I Have a Dream” 3) These words were ironically delivered on sacred ground between America’s shrines to Jefferson and Lincoln.

King struck a further parallel with Douglass describing the redemptive power of misery, conjuring once more blacks’ special capacity to endure for the sake of the American mission. In one instance, King declared: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering.... Do to us what you will and we will still love you.” (“What We Must Do” 341) King epitomized a vast, dedicated effort involving countless souls over decades to encourage, demand, beseech and shame America to act on its creed and extend the promise to its black countrymen.<sup>13</sup>

Others reached a different conclusion, choosing to leave rather than sticking it out. Before and after emancipation, small numbers of free blacks actively sought refuge elsewhere. Though Frederick Douglass opted out, there were a number of free blacks in the 1820s and again in the 1860s who, “pushed out of an America that refused to treat them as equal,” traveled to Haiti believing they might find “potential for advancement,” a shared community, a “black land of the free.” (Fanning 78).

There was also the work of the American Colonization Society, which during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century encouraged and organized emigration of freed blacks to Liberia. Their motives were subject to disparate interpretations – viewed as opportunistic, benevolent, and also a racist scheme to facilitate “black removal” and ensuring America’s future as a white “homogenous nation.” (Fanning 64; Blight 122). All told, tens of thousands relocated under their own steam

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<sup>13</sup> In 1967 King also invoked the Declaration of Independence while making a case against America’s hypocrisy and the Vietnam War. In “*A Time to Break The Silence*,” a speech given on April 4, 1967, King recalled the Declaration’s words and power as a model for other aspiring democracies. “Even though they quoted the American Declaration of Independence in their own document of freedom,” King noted, America “refused to recognize” Vietnamese claims of independence from French colonialism in 1945 and would eventually carry on with the brutal Vietnamese War.

or with white encouragement in the period preceding and immediately following the Civil War.

To the extent there was another movement advocating black emigration, it was Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the UNIA tapped blacks' deep frustration with false American promises of freedom and a very powerful desire for independence. This movement included a broad agenda of economic, political, social and community self-reliance along with a back to Africa emigration scheme. Garvey launched the Black Star Line both as an economic engine for black self-determination and to facilitate settlement of an African "nation." While both the schemes and Garvey himself were greatly flawed, discredited and, ultimately, failed spectacularly, "the massive following his movement achieved in the early 1920s offered the best testimony to the sense of betrayal the war and its aftermath kindled in black communities," wrote one historian. (E. Foner 175) W. E. B. DuBois, a leading Garvey critic, acknowledged that the emigration proposal was "a brilliant suggestion and Garvey's only contribution to the race problem." (Williams 2)

In 1920, Garvey's UNIA, issued a *Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World*, restating the familiar self evident truth, itemizing a list of grievances, and, committing to "the freedom and equality of every man, woman and child of our race," a commitment pledged with signatories' "lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." (Garvey 23) It was, in its way, a self-authored black Declaration of Independence. The UNIA marked a shift in the locus of control and planted the seeds of Black Nationalism. Rather than dedicating themselves to making a case to America for inclusion, nationalists took matters into their

own hands and would seek to create (by any means necessary) an independent, free, equal state within or outside of the US.

It is hard to find statistical or documentary evidence of blacks pursuing emigration beyond these movements. Writers frequently cite the case of black GI's who, following an experience of freedom in Europe and its absence in America, chose to return to Europe after WWI and WWII. There were also blacks that, for various lengths of time, fled the US including James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Josephine Baker, and others. As artists and writers, their lives, thoughts and thus, their leave-taking, played out in the public eye. Beyond these cases, I would have to speculate that there were others – hundreds, maybe thousands of individual, unreported decisions to breakup with America.

***“Maybe this is the time for questioning, searching and struggling without really believing the struggle can be won.”<sup>14</sup>***

On June 22, 2015, an article appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* titled “The Condition of Black Life is One of Mourning” in which Pomona College Professor and poet Claudia Rankine described:

... the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black: no hands in your pockets, no playing music, no sudden movements, no driving your car, no walking at night, no walking in the day, no turning onto this street, no entering this building, no standing your ground, no standing here, no standing there, no talking back, no playing with toy guns, no living while black. (1-2)

This condition of vulnerability, while always present, now simply unfolds more readily in the public eye. Her account recalls both Thomas Jefferson's prediction and Frederick Douglass' comments as he looked out over the horizon in 1861 to predict a “storm about to beat

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<sup>14</sup> Michelle Alexander, “Ta-Nehisi Coates's ‘Between the World and Me’.” *New York Times, Sunday Book Review*. August 17, 2015



pitilessly” upon us. (“Trip to Hayti” n. pag.) The mourning Rankine described reflects her awareness that at any moment, another black life might be struck down by private fear, racist hatred, or extrajudicial public slaughter. The visible loss of life provides today’s most visceral symbol of America’s denial of black humanity, personhood, life and liberty.

To fully explore the contemporary state of race relations in America is beyond the scope of this paper. To be sure, facts and data appear daily to support the claim that blacks do not seem to be fully covered by the equality, unfettered life, liberty, happiness, safety and self-government that the Declaration proclaimed. Differential rates of progress, economic equity, ease of voting, safety, freedom, and living are well documented.<sup>15</sup> A declaration that “Black Lives Matter,” apparently necessary, echoes in the public sphere.

Amid this backdrop, the “stay or go” debate continues. There is some evidence of this debate playing out in blog posts, a few articles, and the hundreds of comments they fuel. A review of some of the contemporary commentary suggests there are three themes: stay, go, and “stuck.” The case for staying, for continued personal investment in America, is familiar: America is a birthright of black countrymen, the same as (if not more) than anyone. One blogger put it this way: “For a people denied property, rights, the opportunity to possess much less bequeath, America is what we own. It is our life’s work, our investment, our birthright, our trust fund. . . . Our deeds and receipts are written in blood. (LaBouvier 4-5)

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<sup>15</sup> For examples, see U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights ([ocrdata.ed.gov](http://ocrdata.ed.gov)) inequity data summarized in <http://www.thenation.com/article/14-disturbing-stats-about-racial-inequality-american-public-schools/>; on economic inequity and poverty see <http://www.brookings.edu/research/topics/concentrated-poverty>; <https://www.stlouisfed.org/publications/in-the-balance/issue12-2015/why-didnt-higher-education-protect-hispanic-and-black-wealth>; <http://iasp.brandeis.edu/pdfs/Author/shapiro-thomas-m/racialwealthgapbrief.pdf>; criminal justice and voting rights see <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/01/16/3167371/racist-criminal-justice-destroying-democracy/>; <https://www.brennancenter.org/analysis/50-years-later-voting-rights-act-under-unprecedented-assault>;

Less apparent today than in the more hopeful earlier eras of King and Douglass is evidence of unyielding faith in the American mission. To be sure, there is progress and rightful celebration of same – after all, there are black CEO's and leaders in many arenas, not to mention the first black US president. Even with those facts, with the preponderance of time and evidence, blacks seem less convinced of an idealized American greatness that could be fulfilled if only this last hurdle of racial exclusion was solved. Instead, the case seems more pragmatic: there is a greater understanding, documentation, and quantifying of just how much black labor and lives have put into America. The reasoning suggests that it would be a shame to leave now, to walk away from an equity stake in the world's most successful, if flawed, enterprise.

Those encouraging migration out of the US, temporarily or permanently, make the opposite case. Best captured by author Thomas Chatterton Williams, this case acknowledges that blacks “hold an intrinsic stake in America ... that is ours by right of birth and by dint of blood, sweat and hard labor,” yet goes on to conclude that “if this stake remains unrecognized or unredeemable, its value is dubious.” (4) Another author, while making the case to stay, acknowledges the paradox of “reconciling the love of a country that your Blackness has built, but that hates you” and allows that the logical conclusion would be to leave: “objectively it is clear that African Americans should consider their investments in America as sunk costs.” (LaBouvier 4). *Quitting America*, a sweeping book written in 2004 by attorney and human rights activist Randall Robinson, long before the current spate of violence, documents the end of his belief and patience in a nation he deems hypocritical to its own stated values.

There is also a third scenario, somewhere between staying and going that wrestles with the fact that both are impossible choices. This modern condition leaves one unsettled about exactly *what to do*. There is the “absurd stuckness” declared by poet Claudia Rankine, reflecting the reality that “This [America] is it, our life. Here we work, hold citizenship, pensions, health insurance, family, friends and on and on.” (1) Seen here, “stuck” is a logistical condition, if not a first world problem. At the same time, many blacks, bypassed by opportunity and economic mobility, are stuck whether they want to be or not. Stuck is an absence of opportunity, though not necessarily an absence of interest or will.

There is also an emotional middle ground somewhere between retaining hope and embracing departure – viewed by some as pessimism, others as realism. A wave of commentary, provoked by Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book *Between the World and Me*, reflects this emotional turmoil. (Boddener 2-16) Legal scholar Michelle Alexander and other writers remarked (with some alarm) upon the absence of hope in his description of black vulnerability and persistent brutal, deadly racism. In her review of the book for the *New York Times*, Alexander notes that “Little hope is offered that freedom or equality will ever be a reality for black people in America.” She was looking for Coates to provide a path, some prescription, some glimpse of a better future. If the future is bleak and the system resistant to reform *what, then, is one to do?* How do you keep at it day after day? It is an existential crisis for which there are no easy answers. Don’t give up, keep struggling, but don’t be blinded by hope. Not entirely convinced, Alexander concedes, “Maybe this is the time for questioning, searching and struggling without really believing the struggle can be won.” (5)

In his 1852 speech about the Fourth of July, Frederick Douglass found consolation in the fact that America was young. Seventy-six years, he said then, was a mere “speck in the life of a nation,” and there was time for the nation to change, to learn, it was still “impressible.” He went on to say that “Were the nation older, the patriot's heart might be sadder, and the reformer's brow heavier.” (Douglass 4-5). This chapter makes my heart sad and brow heavy. How long should this wait be? At what cost? It is a recurring loop of American history: suspend disbelief in the face of alarming, repeated, brutal evidence. Hope that America really puts actions behind its words. Demand that it live up to them. Get slaughtered. Watch America deny complicity or responsibility. Repeat. One hundred sixty years since Douglass’ observation, it is hard to sustain hope and make the case for staying.

I have faith in the words of the Declaration that America has proven over time it does not. That truth leaves me, my husband, my sons, and my people vulnerable in a place that is at best ambivalent and at worst opposed to my equality, life, liberty, or happiness. There are words for this in our metaphor of relationships. They are co-dependent, toxic, abusive. For me, these are all reasons to go.

## *V. A Conclusion – and Some Common Sense*

Freddie Gray is dead. So is Michael Brown. So are Tamir Rice, Eric Garner and Walter Scott. Trayvon Martin died because of Skittles. Corey Jones is dead because his car broke down. After their cars broke down, Renisha McBride and Jonathan Ferrell each made the mistake of knocking on doors for help so they're not alive. Sandra Bland is dead and what we know for sure is that she was appalled that police would treat her, a citizen, unarmed and righteously outraged, like a violent, wanted terrorist. Nine praying souls in Charleston were gunned down by what could be called "ever-crushing Negro hate" and though the Confederate flag no longer flies over South Carolina's state house, they're still dead.

Before these losses, there were others. Each decade has its martyrs to America's promise. There are no killing fields to point to, no gas chambers or historical markers by the road where James Byrd was dragged and left in pieces in Texas. Further back, there is the bloated body of Emmett Till made a memorial by his mother so we would learn what he learned about assuming too much humanity. There were four little girls blown to bits in Alabama, and others, just as precious, old, young, male, female, cut down by white resistance to black freedom and equality, and by America's failure to act.

At the end of slavery there was another list of infractions that made it impossible to be black and survive. Scores of bodies lay across the north and west and east and south, in Chicago, New York, Oklahoma City, deep within the harsh coal mines of Tennessee and Kentucky, and in the swamps of Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. The Klan killed some, while sheriffs and random empowered whites took others for long rides to tall trees. Black lives fell to rioters, to fake criminal charges, and to a brutal labor system that viewed black lives as expendable. One can reasonably argue that black labor converting the appropriated

resources of the continent was equal to – if not greater than – the power of the Declaration. It made America into America.

***“What has cast such a shadow upon you?  
‘The negro.’”<sup>16</sup>***

Black presence in America has always been an inconvenient truth of the country’s past and present. ‘What has you so troubled?’ was essentially Delano’s question to Benito Cerino in Melville’s eponymous tale. After Cerino (a proxy for slave powers) survived a slave mutiny aboard his ship, the willfully optimistic Delano (the American) is baffled that Cerino is so grim. To paraphrase Delano, ‘You are saved and prosperous and trade like the sun will shine on you.’ Cerino knew otherwise. The future would always be compromised because of the specter of blacks and slavery that he and others like him had wrought. There were memories that could not be forgiven. There would be convulsions without end.

Who is responsible for this? There seems to have been a fundamental shift in how this question was answered from Thomas Jefferson onward. As Jefferson posited, America had a problem, one it had created, and bore responsibility for. His proposal, for all of its flaws, tackled head on what would have to be accounted for: racism, disempowerment, resources, safety, and economic stability. America cast this shadow and it was America’s work to fix it.

After that there were false starts with Reconstruction and an enduring hope that some colonial scheme might make the problem go away. And then, America just moved on. The work and onus then shifted to blacks – if it was going to happen, they would have to make the case, to lay their bodies down, to demand recognition as people, as men, as voters, as equal. To prove their moral worthiness or die trying.

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<sup>16</sup> Melville, Herman. “Benito Cerino” in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*. Penguin Classics, 1986.

***“Can there be any reason to hope, that as the relationship expires, the affection will increase . . . when we have ten times more . . . to quarrel over than ever”<sup>17</sup>***

When I first started this research, my purpose was less a hypothesis, more of an exploration. The idea that I needed to quit America was too large for me to kick around in my head. I needed to understand more – was I being fair in reaching this conclusion, what *exactly* was the nature of my grievances, and were they sufficient to warrant my conclusion. Exploring the Declaration allowed the means to plumb the source of the promises I believe America has broken.

I was not entirely wrong – except the source isn’t the document itself. The Declaration is a cloak that America wraps itself in that draws its power from the wearer’s aspirations. The Declaration is powerful because we need it to be. Early America needed some reason of being, and as reasons go, it offered some good ones: equality, life, liberty, self-rule. Yet evidence would suggest that these are opportunistic ideals – heralded when convenient, equally used to justify noble and deplorable acts, perverted or ignored completely when that suited. The sacred nature of the text endures, a vague yet potent rationale for why America does what it does.

I also had a hunch that was both lived and discerned: ground zero for America’s hypocrisy was race. The willful perversion of the Declaration’s stated ideal was plainly visible here: equality, life, liberty, and self-rule did not equal slavery, slaughter, marginalization or partial citizenship. The twists of logic to make the co-existence of these opposing conditions in and beyond America was – rather literally in some cases – crazy-making. This project allowed me to analyze how black people had tried to make sense of this

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<sup>17</sup> Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense*. 1776.

- to trace the course of wishful thinking and the repeated attempts to use the Declaration to resolve the brutal disconnect between faith and reality. I'm left wondering whether all of this hope, these articles of faith, just fed inertia?

If I am really honest, I had imagined that I could end this journey on a hopeful note. I'd wished that my final chapter could offer some words of love and future reconciliation between America and me. I wanted a final letter that said, "Dear America, I hope you get it together one day, maybe we have a future," that sort of thing. I felt the influence of my inner censor, perhaps out of some internal compulsion of loyalty, or reluctance to reach a more fearless conclusion. *You can't just give up*, I thought.

Well, I think I can now.

What I understand now that I didn't before is that the condition of America, and of blacks within America, is systemic and endemic. It has always been, it always will be. As a black person in America, and as a student of history, I feel that truth in my bones. I at least find comfort that others have known this as well.

***"That it is imperfect, subject to convulsions, and incapable of producing what it seems to promise is easily demonstrated."*<sup>18</sup>**

If there is one figure I have encountered in my research whose message and role in American Independence most intrigued me, it was Thomas Paine. His pamphlet more nearly resembled a true breakup manifesto. If Thomas Jefferson was a stately uncle or professor who offered a learned theory on the nature of man, Enlightenment and independence as you pondered your fate, Paine was the best friend who sat you down,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



poured you a stiff drink and said, 'Look, you know your relationship is over. Stop getting your ass kicked, admit it, and move on.'

*Common Sense* was intended, and by all accounts was successful, as propaganda to de-romanticize the situation, make plain the issues at hand, and convince colonists on the necessity of independence from Britain. Paine was direct, plainspoken and even harsh in his language to drive home his point.

He set out to break the spell of the English constitution. He argued that the beloved British system and Britain were not perfect, noting they may have been good once, but this form no longer worked. It was hopelessly tainted by tyranny and the insanity of monarchy and inherited power.

Then he spoke plainly, stridently: You must break up. Reconciliation is not an option. Don't waver and don't give in, just because of habit, to the belief that they are better. They are not, and wishing will not make it so, any more than wishing can return a prostitute to "former innocence." (58) The British are "murderers" who have burned your houses, destroyed your property, caused parents and children to die, left people destitute. (43) What makes you think it's going to get better? Where's evidence of that?

Paine conferred confidence. He argued that the colonists were capable – young, smart, possessed of natural wealth and the whole world was ready for its business. The colonists can fight, can manage themselves, and can even raise a Navy if so inclined. Who wouldn't be ready to love this new country once Britain goes away?

Most importantly, Paine tackled what might have been the trickiest questions: *If not this, what? If not George, who?* He cobbled together an answer to show that solving this logistical problem was possible. Law would rule, the voice of the people, elected

representatives and a President would provide what government was necessary. He offered hints that could be enlarged by others. Even though he got it wrong, that was okay. His contribution, in large part, was helping Americans to believe that there could be something more – that they didn't have to stay stuck.

Scholars have credited the widespread appeal of Paine to helping to build consensus around Revolution and independence. It was, wrote one, his willingness to boldly put forth his ideas as truth that powered *Common Sense*:

It was this effort to present his political positions, no matter how unconventional and hyperbolic in reality, as simple in form, obvious in content, and consequently universal and indisputable in effect, that constituted the most distinctive aspect of Paine's pamphlet. (Rosenfeld 646)

I think I know now the letter to write. It is not a letter to America. I want to share my last thoughts with my fellow Americans – at least those who harbor even the smallest sense that something is terribly wrong even if they can't yet say it out loud.

This paper has traced three responses of those seeking change since the Declaration until now. One: stay, and hope/demand that America live up to its latent potential to align ideals with actions. Bear continual disappointment. Two: go because you believe those alignments will never manifest. More recently, there is "stuckness," a state of discontent and dissonance because you don't like where you are but won't or don't see options. What is not present in the discourse, and hasn't been - really since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – is a mainstream, actionable movement that declares none of these are sufficient.

I wish I were capable of doing what Paine did: answer the hard questions, imagine a road map, give confidence, and boldly declare a universal truth. If Michelle Alexander longed for hope and answers in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates and could not find them, I guess I should not be so hard on myself.

Yet, the indisputable truth for me is this: *only* sweeping revolution is sufficient to create a future that aligns America's deeds with its declaration. Only revolution would make this a place that I could choose. Failing that in my lifetime, rather than being stuck, I go. But I will make plain the truth I see.

\* \* \*

Dear Friends,

Whatever its beginning, its noble aspirations and republican ideals, now is the time to look at what America is, not what it could be. If we are honest, what America has wrought for its people, for black people, for all people, is a legacy of theft and murder, of deception and greed, of hypocrisy and racial hatred. I know it seems harsh, if not disloyal, to name these things aloud. We cannot turn away from these truths, or pretend they are something else.

I believe we must say, without apology, that this nation is broken. We must insist that it is not free, not equal, not self-governed and promotes neither safety nor happiness. Our complicity in the myth gives it power.

We must be unafraid to rescind allegiance. Loyalty is not an absolute: it is earned.

In the end there are only two choices: people have to leave, or America has to go. So if revolution is required for a better nation to be born, let it come.

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